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Some Observations on the Fauna of the Maldiv Islands

PART I—INTRODUCTION

BY

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Through the kindness of the Hon. Mr. Ibrahim Ali Didi, Prime Minister of the Maldiv Islands, my wife and I were able to spend almost three months studying and collecting the fauna of the Maldivian Archipelago. After having been wrecked on Cassanfaru reef, we arrived in Malé, the capital, on the 30th November 1956 and left during the following February.

Bird-study was the chief object of our visit but mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and many invertebrates were studied and collected as and when opportunities occurred. We were fortunate enough, in this connection, to have attached to us for the duration of our visit as interpreter and guide Mr. Ibrahim Didi, who not only spoke and wrote excellent English but knew the names, localities, and many of the habits of most of the Maldivian birds and also of many other members of the fauna of the atolls. This fact was of immense assistance to us, both in the study of the habits and distribution of each species, as well as in the collecting of specimens. Our work was therefore greatly facilitated. William Perera, our taxidermist/collector, who accompanied us from Colombo, also rendered admirable service and prepared many excellent specimens.

The Maldivian Archipelago, lying between latitude 8° north to 1° south and longitude 72° to 74° east, is composed of a chain (double

for much of its length) of coral atolls, resting on a submerged mountain range, some 400 miles to the south-west of Ceylon. In the open seas adjacent to the atolls depths of over 2,000 fathoms have been recorded, while within the reefs 20 to 30 fathoms is normal.

The atolls, or groups of islands and reefs which comprise the Archipelago, number 19. They extend from north to south for a distance of nearly 470 miles and are 70 miles across at the widest. Immediately to the north, across the '8 Degree Channel', is Minicoy of light-house fame, and still further north, across the '9 Degree Channel', are the Laccadive Islands, stretching northward almost to the Indian coast. 300/400 miles to the southward of the most southerly atoll, Addu, lies the Chagos Archipelago.

The islands which form the atolls are all quite small and low lying; they are rarely more than 6 feet above sea-level. Some have swampy areas in their interiors, and all have coral reefs around them. Over 2,500 of them have been counted but less than 220 are permanently inhabited. Most of the larger have been planted with coconut palms among the succulent scrub and low undergrowth that flourishes in their coral sands; a few have large evergreen trees, mostly imported, growing round the villages and some of the swamps. Although tropical, climatic conditions are equable being governed by the two monsoons, the south-west blowing from April-August and the north-east from October-February, bringing ample rain and cool winds in their train.

Between 85,000 and 90,000 is the estimated population of the Archipelago. The people depend chiefly upon fishing for a livelihood. Malé, the capital, is in North Malé Atoll, about the centre of the group. It is reputed to have a population of between 8,000 and 9,000, living on an island 1 mile in length by about $\frac{1}{2}$ a mile in breadth.

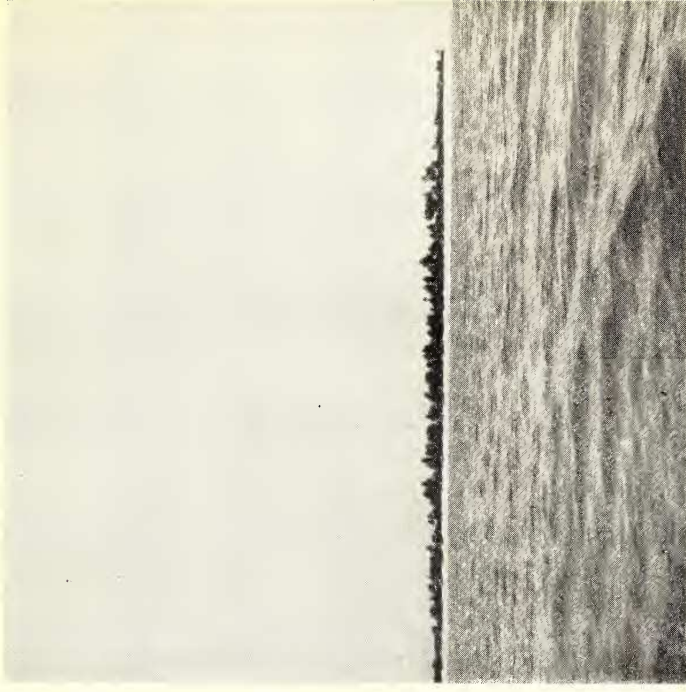
Owing to difficulties of inter-atoll communications, most of our specimens were taken in or near North Malé Atoll but a few were brought in by fishermen and others from outlying islands in other atolls. The specimens were handed over, on our return to England, to the British Museum (Natural History), where they have been worked out by various members of the scientific staff, to whom our best thanks are due for the extra work involved.

Little collecting has been done in the past in the Maldives, except for marine forms collected by Gardiner during his expeditions. True, he collected a few birds, reptiles, and amphibians, but only casually. So, until our visit, much of the fauna of the Archipelago was unknown.

Speaking generally, there can be no question that the Maldivian fauna as a whole is very closely related to that of the Indian peninsula; in many cases it appears identical, amply supporting the theory that most species have come to the atolls either from India or



Malé, capital of the Maldives Islands, from Hullule Island.



Lankcumfurri—nesting place of Shearwaters. A typical reef-island.

Photos : W. W. A. Phillips